

Science as Hallucination in Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*

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As one closes *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, published by H.G. Wells in 1896, it is not easy to get rid of a lurking suspicion that there might be more than meets the eye there as far as madness is concerned: the obvious, long commented-upon madman, Moreau the scientist, might conceal another one, Prendick the narrator, and perhaps even a series of other ones, conjured up by Prendick's delirium — until the final chapters of the novel stage an unleashed proliferation of madness, a collective hallucination of extreme porosity and exchange between natural species. I will defend the position that Moreau, the obvious scapegoat, is too typical to be honest, that he is a conspicuous decoy to screen a less expected madman, the narrator himself — a way for Wells to safely circumscribe and contain within the field of science, and within the minor harmless subgenre of science-fiction, what is in fact a crucial formal mutation, and to ascribe to science only an intention that is also literary.

The novel is usually defined as one of Wells's dystopias concerned with the disquieting prospects opened to science in that age of sweeping scientific discoveries, in the wake of the publication by Darwin of the *Origin of Species* in 1859, which was admittedly a watershed

in modern intellectual history. But Wells seems to be enacting an important displacement, from the hackneyed and thus reassuring *topos* of the mad scientist to the more original and disquieting one of the mad narrator — an interesting development at a time when literature and science were not yet the distinct “two cultures” that C.P. Snow described in his essay¹, and when they dialogued in their collaborative exploration of contemporary issues² — in this particular case the issue of Evolution. So perhaps is it not so surprising that the narrator should follow in the madness of the scientist, and develop the same agenda in his own field: beyond commenting on the ethical issues of science, Wells proposed a metatextual reflexion on literature at the centre of this presumably minor text.

The publication of *The Origin of Species* triggered immense controversy: it dealt a major, arguably fatal, blow to the creationist belief in the fixity of the world, and thus generated a probably unprecedented crisis of identity, what John Glendening called “a cognitive entanglement” (Glendening, 17)³. Along similar lines and in the same period, as a parallel or as a consequence, the dominant frame of Realism was beginning to be seriously questioned: the possibility for literature to order the world — which increasingly appeared to be varied, multiple and infinite — along the categories of language felt inadequate and

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1. “The Two Cultures” is the title of a very influential conference given by C. P. Snow, a British scientist and novelist, at the Cambridge 1959 Rede lecture: he argued there that the new split between science and the humanities was a major mistake, detrimental to the development of classical knowledge. It was published in 1960 as *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*.
 2. In *The Literary Imagination from Erasmus Darwin to H.G. Wells* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), Michael R. Page explains that from the 1830’s, “the arc of the conversation between literature and science began to take a more overtly evolutionary turn. Imaginative writers began to work their way through the philosophical and ethical questions raised by science.”
 3. “Overall, the entanglement of binary pairs constitutes a *mélange* of phenomena that thwarts the ability of the mind to comprehend reality”, in John Glendening, *The Evolutionary Imagination in Late-Victorian Novels. An Entangled Bank*. Montana: Ashgate, 2007, p. 17.

delusional, and the period was characterized by the gradual dismissal of the omniscient narrator as the warrant of the stability of the world. *The Island of Doctor Moreau* starts indeed with casting heavy doubt on the pertinence of third-person omniscient narration: the account of the shipwreck of the *Lady Vain* as it is authoritatively reported in the papers, according to the presumably unquestionable testimonies of eye-witnesses, is proved wrong and the omniscient objective worldview is dismissed, marked as pathological literary delusion of grandeur, to open the way to the fluctuations of an alternative tentative first-person version.

But the first-person narrator reveals to be just as dissident and anathema in his field as Moreau in his own: he upsets literary norm just as Moreau upsets scientific positions. The novel is thus remarkable because it explores the intimate and complex links between knowledge, fiction and madness. It is remarkable in its attempt to draw a parallel between the scientist and the narrator, between the mad overreaching attempts of science, and the corresponding literary hallucination, omnipotence being a fantasy pertaining to both: Wells enacts a literary mutation in this formal laboratory, he insists on the necessary link between literature and delirium, and develops the modern idea that literary discourse should not try to discipline the world, but rather aim at fantasizing it.

The mad scientist was a current *topos* in the 19th century, admittedly dating back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818, and in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, Wells adds to that already impressive cosmopolitan congregation of mad scientists a prominent figure indeed, that was immediately to rank among the VIPs of the genre: Doctor Moreau embodies not only the timeless Promethean desire to reach above his condition, but his is a madness that is fuelled further by its burning contemporary new relevance. Moreau is indeed "a Frankenstein in a post-Darwinian guise" (Bergonzi, 108), and his fantasy of creating human beings out of animals is directly prompted by the new developments in the theory of Evolution that are conspicuously mentioned in the novel.

I have got no intention of denying the obvious here, Moreau is undoubtedly mad, diagnosed as such indeed by the whole of the scientific community and ostracised in an island that works as a geographical straightjacket. A fellow to Doctor Frankenstein, Doctor Rapperschwyll, and Doctor Jekyll⁴, signalled by the ironic marker “doctor”, he is a by-the-book madman, and bears all the attributes of scientific madness as literature had already built the type: he has got the stereotypical bushy brows and dishevelled mane (“A massive white-haired man⁵” [20]), he is exalted and obsessive (“I am itching to get to work again — with that new stuff”, said the grey-haired man, nodding towards the enclosure. His eyes grew brighter” [29]), he locks himself day and night in a secret laboratory where he can play Bluebeard (“Our little establishment here contains a secret or so, is a kind of Blue-Beard’s chamber, in fact. Nothing very dreadful, really, to a sane man” [30]); he is distinctly megalomaniac (“I was the first man ...” [70]), he has his creations call him “master” as he usurps the role of God and tampers with nature (“This time I will make a rational creature of my own. After all, what is ten years? Man has been a hundred thousand in the making” [76]), **without any consideration at all for ethics**: “To this day I have never troubled about the ethics of the matter. The study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature” (73). He does not hesitate to be his own jubilatory guinea-pig, and to cut into his own thigh with an Olympian calmness that reads like a symptom: “He drew a little penknife as he spoke from his pocket, opened the smaller blade and moved his chair so that I could see his thigh. Then, choosing the place deliberately, he drove the blade into his leg and withdrew it” (72).

4. Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* en 1818, Edward Page Mitchell wrote *The Ablest Man in the World* en 1879, and Stevenson wrote “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” in 1886. One could also quote, on the Continent, Gustave le Rouge’s *Docteur Cornélius*, published in 1912, as well as Norbert Jacques’s *Docteur Mabuse* published in 1921.

5. All the references are to the edition: H.G Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, London, Penguin Classics, 2005 (1896).

His speech as well often reads like repetitive delirium: it is obsessive as he abruptly interrupts conversations to reel on about his own leitmotives (“though you are uninvited” [27], “And now comes the problem of that uninvited guest” [29], “but you’ll remember you are uninvited” [29]), three times in the same conversation. It is incomplete and frequently interrupted, Moreau’s sentences often following one another without any logical order, simply juxtaposed, associative, broken by silences, yawns or arbitrary smiles.

Doctor Moreau is thus explicitly over-inscribed as a mad scientist. He is all the more identifiable as such since he situates his research right on the same tracks as those who preceded him: like Frankenstein and Jekyll, he rejects the idea of the materiality of the human body, and proposes to explore and exploit what he calls its “plasticity”. Following in the work of Jekyll who had asserted ten years earlier that the body was merely a garment one could choose to wear (“Certain agents I found to have the power to shake and to pluck back that fleshy vestment” (Stevenson, 82), Moreau goes a step further: “I wanted — it was the only thing I wanted — to find out the extreme limit of plasticity in a living shape” (73) or: “To that — to the study of the plasticity of living forms — my life has been devoted” (69). For Moreau as for Frankenstein and Jekyll, the mind is even more plastic and multiple than the body; he shapes the conjecture that “the mental structure is even less determinate than the bodily” (70), and actually manages to demonstrate Jekyll’s world-famous working hypothesis: “Others will follow, others will outstrip me on the same lines; and I hazard the guess that man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens” (Stevenson, 82). In this context, Moreau’s progress is substantial: Frankenstein had opened the way by composing a human being out of inanimate matter, but the experiment had been cut short since he had refused to create a companion for his monster. Jekyll’s success was merely due to chance, probably owing to the presence of an impure ingredient in the salt he had used — thus making his achievement highly ephemeral and hazardous. Moreau on the other hand stabilizes a real method to emancipate living creatures from their bodily coordinates, and is thus

able to envision mass creation, through the hope that acquired characteristics will eventually be inherited. The blasphemy is even more serious as Moreau is not only “classically” overreaching: he proposes a delirious, inverted version of Darwin’s groundbreaking new scientific *doxa*, and his experiment is both a crazy acceleration and an inverted hallucination. It is an acceleration because the slow continuous evolution of species as it is described by Darwin is subjected to a frantic rhythm marked by discontinuity: Moreau fantasizes he can short-circuit centuries of evolution, and create humans directly from animals. It is a hallucination because he thus activates the nightmare of retrogression, the fantasy of rampant collective animalisation triggered by the discovery of the continuity between man and animal.

Prendick, a skilled narrator despite his efforts to convince the reader of the contrary — (“My inexperience as a writer betrays me” [8]) — builds his case methodically against Moreau, and volunteers a verdict against Moreau’s sanity, thus strategically diverting suspicion from himself: “He was so irresponsible, so utterly careless. His curiosity, his mad, aimless investigations, drove him on” (93).

Moreau is thus logically expelled from narration, savagely massacred by his own creatures, a spectacular victim of the same dismembering and dispersion of the body he had imposed on them: “One hand was almost severed at the wrist and his silvery hair was dabbled in blood. His head had been battered in by the fetters of the puma” (103). The verdict is clear, and punishment exemplary: Moreau is expelled from the text, literally annihilated, eventually burnt to ashes by his own associates. Yet, what is remarkable is that the death of Moreau does not coincide with the end of the text, far from it: though the story is technically ended, discourse goes on for five more chapters that actually cover no fewer than ten months out of the eleven months that constitute the total of Prendick’s stay on the island — ten months that are literally unspeakable, according to Prendick⁶.

6. “In this manner began the longer part of my sojourn upon this Island of Doctor Moreau. But from that night until the end came, there was but one thing happened to tell save a series of innumerable small unpleasant details and the

The death of the scapegoat is no expiation after all, and there is no return to order and sanity — quite the opposite. The polarisation of madness on Moreau alone proves inadequate to circumscribe the Victorian collective fears about the contemporary radical questioning of the notion of identity: as he dies, the madness that had been externalized and localized in this mask reappears where it belongs, that is within the narrator, and proliferates from there.

There is indeed increasing proof that, despite the initial ironic trick to rule out the possibility of Prendick's madness (the text is presented as a vindication of his sanity by his nephew who insists that he has been unduly *thought* mad⁷), the narrator does present all the signs of psychotic disorder, as it was being theorized by Freud at precisely the same time as the publication of the novel⁸. Crucially, he confuses the inside and the outside, and there is a strong probability that Moreau and Montgomery might be hallucinations, projections outside the self of the ambivalence he cannot bear to assimilate⁹

fretting of an incessant uneasiness. So that I prefer to make no chronicle for that gap of time, to tell only one cardinal incident of the ten months I spent as an intimate of these half-humanised brutes. There is much that sticks in my memory that I could write, — things that I would cheerfully give my right hand to forget; but they do not help the telling of the story." (119)

7. Prendick's madness is cleverly mentioned in an antiphrasis, to convince the reader against the collective diagnosis of madness, which is a daring move indeed, since one can also take it at face value, and read it as liminary warning: "He gave such a strange account of himself that he was supposed demented" (3). Prendick himself confirms and radicalizes the diagnosis in the final chapter: "No doubt my discoverers thought me a madman" (127). As in many texts studied in this volume, the author is thus careful to maintain the possibility of a hesitation about the narrator's reliability.
8. 1896 was precisely the year when the word "psycho-analysis" was coined by Freud, and he had published the year before with Breuer an influential essay on male hysteria that is uncannily close to Prendick's case (Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria*, London: Penguin 2004 [1895]).
9. There is a long tradition, particularly in the literature of the double, of that kind of hallucinatory process — in the same line of analysis, Professor Moriarty reads as a projection of Sherlock Holmes's own ambivalence.

— what Racamier calls “hallucinatory projections”, leading to a sense of “symbiotic fusion” (Racamier, 129). Indeed, apart from himself, no one ever sees these characters, there is no trace of them whatsoever on the island; it is very remarkable in the text that Prendick methodically dissolves identity boundaries between himself, Montgomery and Moreau, literally seeing himself as part of a fused trinity¹⁰, and attributing to these imaginary others an intention and a fear that are highly intimate — and then feeling utterly threatened by these hallucinations, developing a paranoid fantasy that they want to kill him.

Paranoia is everywhere, and on the island of Dr. Moreau, Prendick feels every window gives him the black eye: “The black window stared at me like an eye” (77). He is convinced that Moreau has sent after him an army of monstrous creatures to capture and then dissect him, in order to turn him into an animal: “Were they peering at me already out of the green masses of ferns and palms over yonder, watching until I came within their spring? Were they plotting against me? What was the Hyena-swine telling them? My imagination was running away with me into a morass of unsubstantial fears” (46). The interrogations, building a sense of unreliable and unstable reality, the unrelenting -ING form, the loss for Prendick of the grammatical status of subject in the first sentences, and the reduction of the self to the position of a direct object, all point at Racamier’s diagnosis: “*chez tous les psychotiques, la perte ou l’évanescence du sentiment du moi*” (Racamier, 54). Obviously, the fear of dissection, an avatar of the liminal fear of cannibalism he experienced in the little dinghy after the traumatic shipwreck, is an illustration of that acute sense of self-loss, as it is identified by Prendick himself. With his remark “I was in a state of collapse . . . , in a state bordering on hysterics” (46),

10. They all have the same scientific training “I’ve done some science myself — I did my biology at University College” (9) for Montgomery, and “I told him I had spent some years at the Royal College of Science, and had done some research in biology under Huxley” (27) for Prendick, which leads Moreau to pluralise the first person singular: “As it happens, we are biologists here” (27), and to become incorporated to Prendick and Montgomery: “Montgomery used to be just the same” (68).

he echoes the same sense of self-dissolution he felt in the dinghy, “*un vécu d'évanouissement du je, de syncope*” (Racamier, 73): “I remember laughing at that and wondering why I laughed. The laugh caught me suddenly like a thing from without” (6). Prendick suffers from acute schizophrenic dissociation, as the highly impersonal following remark illustrates: “I had half a mind to drown myself then; but an odd wish to see the whole adventure out, a queer, impersonal, spectacular interest in myself, restrained me” (54). This “spectacular interest” in himself inscribes the inner split: he watches himself, or rather “half his mind”, from the outside, and fantasizes “himself as someone else” to paraphrase Ricœur’s title¹¹. The neurotic crisis of *ipse* (selfhood) as Ricœur defines it evolves into a psychotic crisis of *idem* (sameness), and Prendick further projects his confusion onto the outside world: in this delirious island of his, everything loses its contours, reality becomes mobile and is caught in a process of frantic exchange. “We are on the edge of things” (67), claims Moreau, and indeed, hybridity becomes the rule, frontiers between species expand and eventually constitute all there is, a kind of monstrous amplification of liminality: reality gets border-line.

The most bewildering aspect of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is then probably the fantasy of this in-between world that is conjured up, and sustained for about fifty pages. Under the impulsion of Prendick’s delirious imagination, the world obeys a law of generalized exchange and it is caught in a process of universal becoming, through the essential porosity of all the species. The world becomes not only plastic as Moreau wanted it, but totally fluid, forms and positions are arbitrary and transient, turned into perpetually mobile transforming forces. Prendick states: “One perhaps was ursine chiefly, another feline chiefly, another bovine chiefly; but each was tainted with other creatures, — a kind of generalised animalism appearing through the specific dispositions” (122), anachronistically and uncannily recalling Deleuze’s “devenir animal”: Wells’s suffix in — *ism* does inscribe that becoming process of active circulation,

11. Ricœur Paul. *Soi-même comme un Autre*. Paris : Le Seuil, 1990.

and indeed deterritorialisation is massive and irresistible, the ternary rhythm giving that general “tainting” a sense of inescapability. Prendick seems to revel in the jubilatory description of that orgiastic mixture, where monkey-men or rhino-rats colonise the island, where humans grow pointed and hairy ears (“That man had pointed ears, with fur” [31]), or horse hair (“They had lank black hair, almost like horse-hair” [25]):

The two most formidable Animal Men were my Leopard-man and a creature made of hyena and swine. Larger than these were the three bull-creatures who pulled in the boat. Then came the silvery-hairy-man, who was also the Sayer of the Law, M’ling, and a satyr-like creature of ape and goat. There were three Swine-men and a Swine-woman, a mare-rhinoceros-creature, and several other females whose sources I did not ascertain. There were several wolf-creatures, a bear-bull, and a Saint-Bernard-man. I have already described the Ape-man, and there was a particularly hateful (and evil-smelling) old woman made of vixen and bear, whom I hated from the beginning. (122)

Prendick obviously sees the world not as a collection of stable forms, but as the active setting for constant circulation of forces: his urge to dissolve set categories and separate identities through the amount of compound adjectives creates what Deleuze described as a “zone of indifferenciation or indiscernability”, where “becoming” is the rule of being: “*Devenir n’est pas atteindre à une forme (identification, imitation, mimésis), mais trouver la zone de voisinage, d’indifférenciation ou d’indiscernabilité telle qu’on ne peut plus se distinguer d’une femme, d’un animal, ou d’une molécule*” (Deleuze, 11). Nothing is stable or entire anymore, and it crucially becomes impossible to differentiate men from beasts; such a blending process is reflected in Prendick’s grammar, marked by the constant use of metaphor, which can be interpreted as a grammatical mutation of compound adjectives, we could even say a schizophrenic shortcut: “I made a young ass of myself” (10), or “You’ve made a beast of yourself” (105). As Barthes proved, metaphor is a stylistic figure of becoming,

a way to create a “gliding” between two distinct elements, as he put it¹². Prendick is contaminated by that general process of exchange: “In this way I became one among the Beast People in the Island of Doctor Moreau” (116), he totally internalises the outer world (“my Ape-man” [32]) and the specific nature of humanity is not given any more, it becomes a paranoid open question in the interro-negative form: “Are we not men?” (57, repeated 59).

We could thus say that Prendick as a mad narrator succeeds where Moreau as a mad scientist has failed: he manages to activate a radical version of Moreau’s mad ideal of the complete plasticity of the human body, and thus both to revel in and to conjure the Victorian fear of retrogression created by the publication of *The Origin of Species*.

What remains for us to demonstrate is that he does it on the plastic terrain of literature: not only is he a mad narrator whose version is thus highly questionable but his narration itself is an experiment in delirium, and thus a militant literary move. It seems to be a way for Wells, at a time of scientific, but also quite clearly of literary transition, when Realism was losing part of its pertinence, to come up with a dissident proposal, with a modern literary alternative. Prendick’s delirium thus becomes a literary laboratory for Wells, a way to experiment on new forms and to oppose the Realist *doxa* that the aim of literature was to describe the world as closely and faithfully as possible. Lacan proved that psychosis is always reflected in language troubles: “*Nous devons exiger, avant de porter le diagnostic de psychose, la présence de troubles dans l’ordre du langage*” (Lacan, 106) and I would now like to analyse the forms these troubles take in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*.

The most striking grammatical trouble is probably what we could call the wanderings of the first person pronoun. The more insecure Prendick’s sense of self gets, the less clear it is who the ‘I’ refers to.

12. “*La métaphore n’a aucun des dangers de l’adjectif : elle n’est pas apposition, épithète, complément, mais glissement*”, in Barthes Roland. *Le Neutre*. Paris : Le Seuil, 2002, p. 91.

In the sentence “I remember laughing at that, and wondering why I laughed” (6), the gap between the first ‘I’ and the second one inscribes the crisis of identity within grammar itself¹³: the pronoun refers to two distinct focalisers, and the coma works in the sentence as a grammatical mirror, highlighting the inner split, the “spectacular” feeling of the narrator, who no longer coincides with himself, and whom the ‘I’ fails to contain. It thus becomes “*une pure fonction narrative vidée de toute identité*” (Naugrette, 71) as Naugrette put it about a similar analysis in “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”.

At other times, Prendick’s sense of inner split results in the redoubling of the ‘I’ with a ‘he’: instead of referring to two selves with a unique ‘I’ as we just saw, he refers to the same self with either ‘I’ or ‘he’. One instance is particularly telling: “All the time the strangeness of him was shaping itself into my mind” (42). The intricate grammar creates ambiguous meaning: the reader can either understand that Prendick is gradually led to feel that Moreau is really strange, or — if we consider Moreau as a hallucinatory ejection of one part of Prendick’s psyche — that the delusion that Moreau is a stranger (and not intimate ambivalence) progressively colonises his mind. In that case, “him” refers to “himself”, “him” and “my” are two distinct signifiers a disturbed mind uses to describe the same split signified. Prendick’s impossibility to anchor the “I” leads to a paranoid heretic rephrasing of probably the most famous cross-definition of rationality and existence in Western culture, namely Descartes’s famous “*Je pense donc je suis*” in his *Discours de la Méthode*. Whereas for Descartes thinking is the definite proof of existence, for schizophrenic Prendick thinking immediately conjures up death, or rather lack of existence: it is no warrant of the solidity of the self any more, quite the opposite: “I had a persuasion that I was dead” (46), which echoes Jekyll’s crucial exclamation “Think of it: I did not even exist!” (Stevenson, 86). Both scientists-narrators thus introduce great trouble in the order of

13. Of course, the gap is also due to the distance between the time of the narration and the time of the story.

language: trusted to their highly fluid identity, the 'I' becomes just as plastic as their effusive sense of self.

The crisis of the 'I' as homogeneous perceiving subject brings about a crisis of reality itself: the stability of reality is heavily questioned since the narrator is no longer able to discriminate what belongs to facts from what belongs to deluded interpretation. This results in a rather random and bewildering use of modes and modalisation: instead of saving the indicative mode for real events, and of using modals, the subjunctive or fictive present to express subjectivity or probability, Prendick completely dispenses with such classical uses, and very efficiently blurs grammatical frontiers. He regularly uses the indicative, and even simple present, for events that really evoke hallucinations to the reader, and on the contrary he uses as many kinds of modalising screens as he can, in particular epistemic modals, to disqualify reality as such, to relegate it to a mere possibility.

"Splash, splash, came the pursuing feet, nearer and nearer" (62): here, the pursuing feet belong to no one that Prendick or the reader will actually see, but they acquire a real status as Prendick uses no grammatical form of distancing — though the reader is alerted by the sudden onomatopoeia, and the obsessive binary rhythm that points at dissociation. As he tries to escape his imaginary pursuer, nature is described as an animated vegetable prison, and once more this is accounted for with simple preterit: "Its walls grew steep, and approached each other" (63). His version of reality, namely that in their laboratory, Moreau and Montgomery vivisect humans to turn them into animals, thus becomes the truth: "Moreau had been vivisecting a human being. . . . This island was inhabited only by these two vivisectors and their animalised victims" (53). As opposed to that, the fact that indeed it is all a dream, is de-realised by the use of modality, and a lexical field of imagination: "I could have fancied it was a dream" (44). As Prendick opts out of the system of grammatical categories it is left for the reader to actively discriminate between reality and delirious hallucinations, confronted as he is to statements that are inclusive of their own contradiction: "I could see nothing — or else I could see too much" (45) — or rather to notice that

they might all be hallucinations, as Prendick himself unconsciously encourages him to: “Imagine yourself surrounded by the most horrible cripples and maniacs it is possible to conceive, and you may understand a little of my feelings with these grotesque caricatures of humanity about me” (43). “Imagine”, “conceive”, “caricature” all point at representation, they insist that these “animen” might well be effects of his deluded mind.

Finally, it is quite obvious that for Prendick language itself creates reality: language is no longer there to name, stabilise and define reality, it gets carried away, notably through free sound associations that are typically psychotic. Language becomes active raw material, and Prendick’s linguistic manipulations enable him to conjure up reality, gliding freely from one word to another. A striking example concerns the schizophrenic creation of Dr. Moreau as what we could call a concept. It is highly probable that Prendick has heard the name before, and sort of recycled it as he needed it, through assonances: “Where had I heard the name of Moreau before? There came surging into my head the phrase “The Moreau Hollows” — was it? “The Moreau — “Ah! It sent my memory back ten years. “The Moreau Horrors!” (54) Language no longer progresses diachronically and causally: it undergoes a kind of synchronic shock, words telescope one another and bring up alternative reality.

Instead of corseting reality, of mastering it through the set categories of language as the positivist linguistic system of Realism aimed at doing, Prendick definitely proposes a literary alternative, where words aim at creating discomfort, at displacing reality, and through this mad narrator, Wells seems to share Deleuze’s literary ideal:

Écrire n'est certainement pas imposer une forme (d'expression) à une matière vécue. La littérature est plutôt du côté de l'informe ou de l'inachèvement. Écrire est une affaire de devenir, toujours inachevé, toujours en train de se faire, et qui déborde toute matière vivable ou vécue. [...] Devenir n'est pas atteindre à une forme (identification, imitation, mimésis), mais trouver la zone de voisinage, d'indiscernabilité ou d'indifférenciation telle qu'on

ne peut plus se distinguer d'une femme, d'un animal, ou d'une molécule. (Deleuze, 11)

In this short unassuming novella, Wells surreptitiously displaces his explicit aim — namely to classically warn the Victorians against the dangerous effects of “science without conscience”, and to explore their most intimate fears of retrogression. As he decides to trust the whole story to a probably mad narrator, not only does he test the reading skills of the reader and engages him in a familiar rhetoric game where his function is partly to detect the gaps in language; he also celebrates the power of literature by modifying its link with reality, in a crucial age of transition. He moves away from the Realist ideosphere, and comes up with a distinctly modern and daring proposal, all in the reputedly minor genre of science-fiction: literature is redefined, against Coleridge’s celebrated phrase, as “a suspension of belief”, a celebration of fictive deliriums. Prendick is the means to highlight the fact that every fiction is a delirium, not least of all the seemingly solid, trustworthy omniscient narration, marked as pathological delusion of narrative grandeur. A mad first-person narration is thus the closest one can get to fictive truth.

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NATHALIE JAËCK

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